FEATURES

Unitarian church bells explained

SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

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By James Pidacks Dec. 13, 2023

How do the bell chimes work to sound on the hour? This learning
started while working with a vendor on security cameras. I was i

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tower for the first time. I looked at all the equipment and wanted to learn more.

This picture shows a motor coupling between a 220-volt electric motor and a gear drive assembly in the bell tower. It is connected to the equipment used to ring the bells. Notice the pile of brass shavings on the floor and the shredded gray connector belt. I had never seen a coupling like this before, but I knew it was not good. I showed the folks on the Building Committee the photo. They asked if I would help figure out what was going on. So, always curious, I wondered how it all worked, how it kept accurate time (probably not with NTP [Network Time Protocol] from the Internet), and how we'd fix it.

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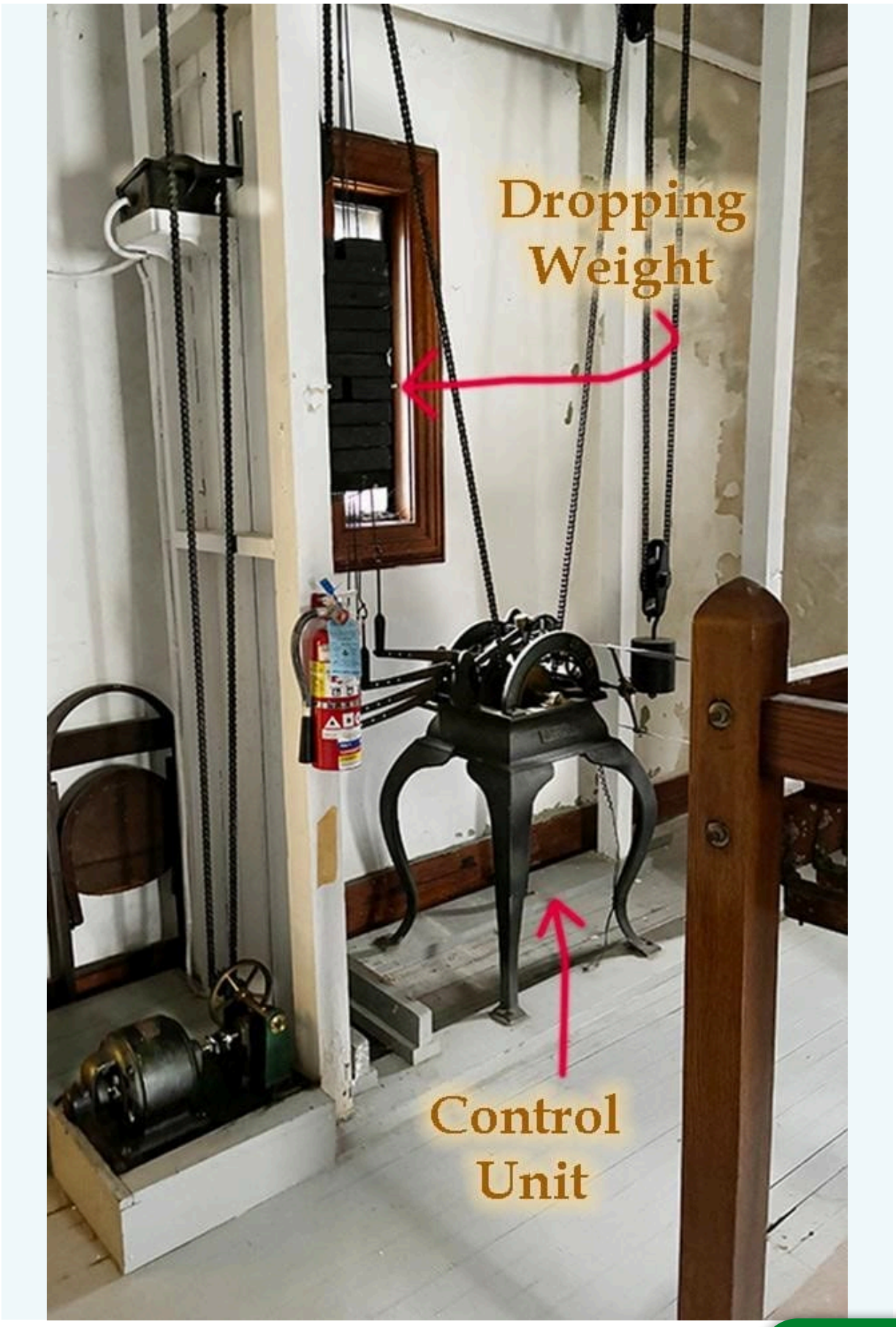

This photo shows the overall assembly. When it's time to ring the bells, a signal to release a cat
control unit happens (that round thing in the middle). The dropping weight on the left provide
rotate the center drum. Cams on the drum pull the four cables and ring the chime bells. The wei
right helps keep the proper tension on the chain.

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Here's a close-up of the control assembly. The flat panels in front whirl and spin, acting as a governor to manage rotational speed, ensuring that the chimes ring at the same rate each time, regardless of how high or low the weights are. Okay, that is fun to watch, but how does it keep time?

When you're in the lower level hallway near the restrooms, do you ever wonder why we keep a dead clock by the stairs? Well, it's more than that. It's the original clock that controlled the chimes.

There is a paper tape loop with holes (see photo) and a reader inside the case, running along the left. When the old clock worked, its movement would move the paper tape. When a hole was reached, a switch closed, and the unit up in the bell tower got to work and rang the chimes. W the weights reached the floor, the motor turned on and lifted the weights

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back up to be ready to ring the chimes again. The paper tape system died years ago. Who knows if the clock would still work if we wound it?

Now, the church has a digital control box on the wall around the corner from the clock. It replaced the mechanical clock. If I were taller, I'd be able to read the instructions. So now we know how we kept time for the chimes in the old days and how we do it now. The next question was how to repair the motor coupling and who to call.

I returned to the bell tower and found this set of handles which is used to play the chimes and has the vendor name MeNeely & Company, Watervliet, NY (near Rochester). The company opened in 1826 and closed in 1952 (before I was born).

Amazingly, all of the bells, chimes, and controller was installed in the 1920s and still work today (except for that clock paper tape gizmo). The damaged coupling was replaced with a metal and plastic spider coupling, which cost about $20. It took under an hour to replace. We included these images of the bells and control armature to round out a glimpse at the uppermost level of the bell tower.

James Pidacks is a member of the Unitarian Building and Grounds Committee.

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March 4, 2026

FEATURES

Celebrating Black history and culture with art, reflection, and community

The following was submitted by the Network for Social Justice: The Winchester community came together last week at the Griffin Museum of Photography for the inaugural Black History and Culture Celebration, an evening filled with music, student creativity, and powerful messages about equity, unity, and the enduring legacy of Black

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Well, Winchester, we made it through the weekend with only a coating of snow that

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The big events in Winchest
Music School always take place in Nichols

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amounted to nothing on Sunday afternoon. But during the Feb. 22-23 blizzard, Winchester News once again asked residents to send their snow photos. And here is what we received! Solmaz Amirnazmi said her daughters and

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Performance Hall. With the school and its performances' growing in popularity, the hall and many of its amenities are due for an upgrade. The performance hall is one of the main areas that the school seeks to

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Celebrate Women's History Month with Girls Leading Change

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NEWS

Winchester School Committee candidates bring contrasting backgrounds to Thursday forum

Two candidates for Winchester's School Committee will face voters at a forum as the district navigates a new literacy curriculum, budget pressures and questions about student mental health. Heather von Mering and John Bellaire are competing for an open seat on the School Committee, which oversees a budget von

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March 4, 2026

EVENTS

Ripley Chapel in Winchester presents ‘Syldason: You Are Welcome Here’

The following was submitted by the Ripley Chapel at First Congregational Church: On Friday, March 13, beginning at 7:30 p.m., live in-person and live streamed from the stunning Ripley Chapel at First Congregational Church, Winchester, 21 Church St., join in with Syldason, a duo concert featuring Sylvie Zakarian,

March 4, 2026

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